

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)**SciVerse ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 31 (2012) 31 – 36

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCLTA 2011

# The impact of lexically-based language teaching on students' achievement in learning English as a foreign language

Mehrak Rahimi<sup>a</sup> \*, Ghodrat Momeni<sup>a</sup>, Reza Nejati<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup>English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University, Lavizan, Tehran, 1678815811, Iran

## Abstract

This study investigated the impact of Lexically-Based Language Teaching (LBLT) on Iranian high-school students' English achievement. Sixty students participated in a pre-test-post-test quasi-experimental design. Within 16 weeks, new words of the English textbook were taught to the control group based on traditional techniques of teaching vocabulary such as translation and explanation. Meanwhile, new words were taught to the experimental group using LBLT techniques including noticing/recording language patterns and collocations and working with concordancers. The results showed a significant difference between two groups' achievement in favour of the experimental group in learning vocabulary and reading but not in grammar.

© 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Prof. Hüseyin Uzunboylu.

Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

**Keywords:** Lexically-based language teaching, achievement, EFL, concordancers;

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a central component of language teaching and is of great significance to language learners. Words are the building blocks of a language since they label objects, actions, and ideas without which people cannot convey the intended meaning (Thornbury, 2002). Although grammar remains an important part of language acquisition, the lexical memory load, even for an intermediate learner, is enormous (Schmit, 2000). It is now recognized that the principal difference between intermediate and advanced learners is not the complexity of their grammatical knowledge, but the greatly expanded mental lexicon available to advanced learners (Lewis, 1997).

In line with these findings, language experts have focused on teaching vocabulary to help learners increase their communicative competence and performance. Variety of techniques and activities are recommended to be used in teaching vocabulary. However, research shows that traditional techniques such as translation, exemplification, and explanation cannot bring about great development in vocabulary knowledge since they cannot help learners perform well in productive language use (Nunan, 1999). In view of this, vocabulary acquisition is currently receiving attention in second language pedagogy and research and consequently how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently and how vocabulary can best be taught are still contentious issues (Hedge, 2008).

Moreover, the way vocabulary is selected to be included in teaching materials is a significant factor that affects the process of teaching vocabulary and the learning outcome. Most often the example sentences used to teach words

\* Mehrek Rahimi. Tel: +982122970035 ; fax: +9821 22970033

E-mail address: [mehrakrahimi@yahoo.com](mailto:mehrakrahimi@yahoo.com); [rahimi@srutu.edu](mailto:rahimi@srutu.edu)

in EFL course-books are not extracted from authentic sources available (Willis & Willis, 2006). They are mainly selected and included in the textbooks based on writers' personal intuition, experience and knowledge. What they do not take into account is the collocations of each particular word and the frequency account of words in real communication (Thornbury, 2002).

One of the most compelling research-driven evidence on vocabulary learning has been provided by lexically-based language teaching (Willis & Willis, 1989; Sinclair, 1991, 2004). A lexically-based language teaching (LBLT) refers to an approach of teaching language derived from the belief that building blocks of language learning and communication are not grammar, forms, and functions but lexis, that is words and word combinations (Richards & Rodgers, 2003). The most important attempt to realize lexicon-based teaching in practice was made in the development of the Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (COBUILD) (Willis & Willis, 1989). COBUILD and LBLT had a far-reaching impact on different disciplines of study such as linguistics, lexicography, textbook development, and syllabus design (Nunan & Carter, 2002).

Willis (1990) has attempted to provide a rationale and design for lexically-based language teaching and suggests that a lexical syllabus should match an instructional methodology that puts particular emphasis on language use. Such a syllabus specifies words, their meanings, and the common phrases in which they are used and identifies the most common words and patterns in their most natural environments. Thus, the lexical syllabus not only subsumes a structural syllabus, but it also describes how the structures that make up the syllabus are used in the natural language. The lexical approach reflects the belief in the centrality of lexicon to language structure, second language learning, and language use and in particular to multi-word lexical units or chunks that are used and learned as single items (Willis & Willis, 2006).

Lewis (1993) concentrated on lexical chunks as the teaching foundation of lexical approach. He stresses the importance of learning chunks of the language which is made up of lexico-grammatical patterns while increasing learning of key structures. Also, Widdowson (1991) in defining the concept of communicative competence stresses the importance of such chunks:

Communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences... it is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules, so to speak, and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands. Communicative competence in this view is essentially a matter of adaptation, and rules are not generative, but regulative and subservient.

There are several kinds of lexical chunks proposed for language teaching. Collocations, phrasal verbs, idioms, sentence frames, social formulas, and discourse markers are among the most important ones (Thornbury, 2002). The lexical approach to language teaching gives priority to teaching the most frequent words in the language and their patterns in language use. To find the authentic examples and their patterns, the learners are supposed to consult concordances, whether online or printed version made by the teachers (Lewis, 1997). The most significant development in corpus linguistics and concordances made it possible for the learners, teachers, and researchers to have access to authentic and naturally-occurring examples in support of language learning and teaching (Willis & Willis, 1989; 2006). Concordancing technology can provide both teachers and students with a rich tapestry of examples of specific linguistic elements embedded in a variety of rhetorical contexts. It also helps the user to construct meanings and usage patterns based on sentences or pieces of discourse collected from published or transcribed texts (Bloch, 2009).

### *1.1. The current study*

The problem existing in Iranian high-school English textbooks and pre-university book in particular is the lack of attention paid to patterns in which the words are used and the way they occur in these patterns (collocations).

Also, they suffer from lack of attention given to naturally-occurring language (authentic language). The example sentences chosen to teach new words are elicited based on material developers and teachers' intuition and experience (Mazlum, 2010). Moreover, research shows that the words are not well explained and exemplified and the number of activities regarding to vocabulary is not enough (Doudman, 2007). The aim of the current study thus is to investigate the effect of integrating lexical approach on students' achievement in vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. The study thus seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does lexically-based language teaching affect pre-university students' achievement in learning vocabulary?
2. Does lexically-based language teaching affect pre-university students' achievement in learning grammar?
3. Does lexically-based language teaching affect pre-university students' achievement in reading skill?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Sixty Iranian pre-university students participated in this study. The students ranged in age from 17 to 19. They were all majoring in the field of mathematical sciences. The groups were chosen according to convenient sampling from six classes in pre-university centers in a small town in the west of Iran. The reason for using convenient sampling was the availability of a computer lab for the experimental group. Having used the quasi-experimental research design, the researcher assigned the classes into control and experimental groups arbitrarily. None of the participants took part in English language institutes at the time the study was running.

### 2.2. Instruments

Two tests were used as the instruments of this study: a language proficiency test and an achievement test. The language proficiency test with four main subparts (reading, writing, listening and speaking) was used as a pre-test prior to the study. The reliability of the test was estimated using KR20 formula and found to be .71. The achievement test was developed by the educational office for the final exam of all pre-university students across the province. The achievement test had three main sections (vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension). The format of the questions were multiple choice, fill in the blanks, and matching. The reliability of the test was estimated by KR20 and found to be .75.

### 2.3. Procedure

The study took place in the academic year 2010-2011. Two pre-university classes (n=60) were sampled and were considered as the control (n=30) and the experimental groups (n=30). The CD of COBUILD dictionary was installed on the computers in language lab so that students of the experimental group could consult it in their free times. The researcher briefed the experimental group about how to use the dictionary appropriately in learning vocabulary. At the beginning of the study the language proficiency test was administered to both groups.

The material to be taught was English for Pre-University Students: Learning to Read (Birjandi, 2010) that is the official teaching material for this grade in Iran. The book includes eight lessons from which the first four lessons are to be covered for the first semester and the second four ones are taught in the second semester. The teacher used traditional techniques of teaching vocabulary including explanation, definition, and translation of the words out of the context by referring to the list of words in the form of marginal glosses available in reading passages of the pre-university book. Students in the experimental group, however, were taught based on collocations of a particular word. All the examples of collocations for the words were extracted from COBUILD dictionary (2006) and on-line concordancers. Six basic techniques of LBLT according to Lewis (1997) were used including:

- Intensive and extensive listening and reading in the target language,
- First and second language comparisons and translation-carried out chunk-for-chunk,
- Repetition and recycling of activities,

- Guessing the meaning of vocabulary items from the context,
- Noticing and recording language patterns and collocations, and
- Working with dictionaries and other reference tools.

At the end of the experiment, both groups took part in the final exam (the achievement).

### 3. Results

To compare the effect of LBLT on achievement test scores in three subsections, A One Way Multivariate analysis of covariance was conducted (MANCOVA) in which the three subsections of the achievement test served as the dependent variables and grouping (2 levels) acted as the independent variable. Participants' scores on language proficiency test administered prior to the study were used as the covariate in this analysis. Preliminary assumption testing was conducted to check for normality, linearity, and univariate and multivariate outliers. Homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices was assessed by Box's M Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices (Box's  $M=8.538$ ,  $F=1.343$ ,  $p=.234>.001$ ) implying that the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables are equal across groups. The results from the Multivariate tests table suggested a significant multivariate main effect for group, Wilks'  $\lambda = 293$ ,  $F=44.305$ ,  $p=0.000$ , and partial eta squared = .707.

Test of between subject effects revealed that mean differences for vocabulary and reading subsections were significant but the mean difference for grammar subsection was not significant (table 2). Therefore, it can be concluded that while controlling for students' language proficiency, LBLT impacted achievement of reading and vocabulary in the experimental group. However, the treatment did not affect students' achievement in learning English grammar (table 3).

Table 2. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	<i>p</i>	Partial Eta Squared
Pre-test	Vocabulary	198.188	198.188	1.286	.262	.022
	Grammar	4.190	4.190	.042	.838	.001
	Reading	16.926	16.926	.178	.675	.003
Group	Vocabulary	4125.119	4125.119	26.764	.000*	.320
	Grammar	260.711	260.711	2.620	.111	.044
	Reading	8450.788	8450.788	88.648	.000*	.609

Descriptive statistics for groups also show that students in the experimental group had higher levels of achievement in vocabulary and grammar than control group did. Although the mean of grammar achievement for the experimental group is higher than the control group, the mean difference is not significant (table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Independent variables	Group	Mean	SD	N
Vocabulary	Control	50.200	11.3908	30
	Experimental	66.800	13.4174	30
	Total	58.500	14.9104	60
Grammar	Control	41.666	9.8934	30
	Experimental	45.833	9.8934	30
	Total	43.750	10.0317	60
Reading	Control	33.365	7.6597	30
	Experimental	57.096	11.3702	30
	Total	45.231	15.3480	60

#### 4. Discussion

The main goal of this study was investigating the impact of LBLT, an approach that highlights the teaching of frequent vocabulary items in naturally-occurring contexts- on EFL students' achievement in learning English.

The result of the analysis revealed that TBLT had a positive effect on achievement of students in learning vocabulary and reading skill. Since learners can access the natural (authentic) language in its natural context by the techniques of LBLT, they can accomplish a great deal of success in language achievement (Willis & Willis, 2006; Lewis, 2006). In addition, concordance consultation and corpora use can bring about a great deal of achievement in learners' reading comprehension (Chang & Sun, 2009). Since the learners are active analysts in the process of corpus consultation and taking the role of language explorer, there exists a great chance of improvement in learning linguistic items (Johns & Plass, 2002). Further, learners can make use of concordances to gain access to the pattern and use of the most frequent words in the language in conjunction with their pattern of use and thus they improve their language proficiency and knowledge (Belz, 2008). This supports the fact that learners need a great amount of exposure to reading text to acquire new vocabulary and then include the words in their productive skills (Huang, 2007; Gardner, 2007) and that graded readers and online extensive reading can enhance learners' vocabulary repertoire and consequently linguistic knowledge.

However, the findings showed that students' grammar learning was not influenced by LBLT. This finding is not in line with what has been preached about the effect of LBLT on grammar learning, at least in the context of this study. Advocates of lexical approach believe that this method focuses not only on words in isolation but also on the using together of lexical words, or lexical and grammatical words in teaching and most importantly, it includes the teaching of grammar in the teaching of vocabulary and vice versa (e.g., Fan, 2009; Willis & Willis, 2006). It is also asserted that collocations are where grammar and vocabulary teaching meet (Kennedy, 1990) and using concordancers gives students ability to study syntactic and lexical items in authentic rhetorical contexts that facilitate "the marriage of grammar and rhetoric" (Kolln, 2007, p. xi), "which emphasizes how grammatical choice is influenced by rhetorical context" (Bloch, 2009, p. 59).

A few other studies, however, have mentioned uncertainty about the success of lexical approach in teaching grammar. Schmit (2001), for instance, believes that although some kinds of input enhancement and consciousness-raising techniques and activities are included in lexical approach, there needs to be some kind of grammatical explanation for learners to learn the grammatical points (Schmit, 2001) that is not a part of the method. In an empirical study, McEnery, Wilson, and Baker (1997) examined how corpora can meet the needs of grammar teaching at the pre-tertiary level in the UK. In general, they come to the conclusion that a corpus should be at least integrated into teaching but they were not sure whether the teaching of grammar would be more effective by using this technique.

Further, the goal of learning and teaching grammar can be a determining factor in highlighting the role of LBLT in grammar learning. According to Bloch (2009), "this approach has made grammar teaching more about making appropriate choices and less about learning prescriptive rules" (p. 59). Therefore, what is grammatically correct and what is incorrect is not the aim of teaching grammar but a learning environment is created where the student has to reach decisions about appropriateness for them. As a consequence, when grammar is evaluated according to rules of accuracy and not appropriacy, it may seem that students have not achieved the goals of the language course with respect to grammar.

#### References

- Belz, J. A. (2008). The role of computer mediation in the instruction and development of L2 pragmatic competence. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 27, 45-75.

- Birjandi, P., Ananissarab, M. and Samimi, D. (2010). English for pre-university students: Learning to read. Ministry of Education, Tehran: IR Iran. Available online: [www.talif.sch.ir](http://www.talif.sch.ir).
- Bloch, J. (2009). The design of an online concordancing program for teaching about reporting verbs. *Language Learning & Technology*, 13(1), 59-78.
- COBUILD Dictionary on CD-ROM. (2006). US: Collins Publications.
- Chang W.L. and Sun, Y.Ch (2009). Scaffolding and web concordancers as support for language learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 22(4), 283-302.
- Doudman, M. (2007). Investigating EFL program's problems in high-schools of Hormozgan province. MA thesis. Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran. Available online: [www.irandoc.ir](http://www.irandoc.ir).
- Fan, M. (2009). An exploratory study of collocational use by ESL students -A task based approach. *System*, 37, 110-123.
- Gardner, D. (2007). Validating the construct of word in applied corpus-based vocabulary research: A critical survey. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(2), 241-265.
- Hedge, T. (2008). *Teaching and Learning in Language Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Huang, H.T. (2007). Vocabulary learning in an automated graded reading program. *Language Learning & Technology*, 11(3), 64-82.
- Jones, L., & Plass, J. L. (2002). Supporting listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition with multimedia annotations. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86, 546-561.
- Kennedy, G.D., 1990. Collocations: where grammar and vocabulary teaching meet. In: Anivan, S. (Ed.), *Language Teaching Methodology for the Nineties*. (pp. 215-229). SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Singapore,.
- Kolln, M. (2007). *Rhetorical grammar: Grammatical choice, rhetorical effects*. New York: Pearson.
- Lewis, M. (1993). *The lexical approach: The state of ELT and a way forward*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications
- Lewis, M. (1997). *Implementing the lexical approach: Putting theory into practice*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications.
- Mazlum, Z., F. (2010). A Corpus-based Analysis of Iranian High School English textbook. *Roshd FLT Quarterly*, 25(1).45-54. Available online: [www.magiran.ir](http://www.magiran.ir).
- McEnery, T., Wilson, A. and Baker, P. (1997). Teaching grammar again after twenty years: Corpus-based help for teaching grammar. *ReCALL*, 9(2), 8-16.
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Learning and Teaching*. New York. Newbery House.
- Nunan, D. and Carter, R. (eds) (2002). *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ricahrds, J. C. and Rodgers, T. S. (2003). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmitt, N. (2001). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sinclair, J. (1991). *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, J. (ed). (2004). *How to use corpora in language teaching*. Amsterdam: John Bejamins.
- Thornbury, S. (2002). *How to teach vocabulary*. London: Longman Pearson.
- Widdowson, H. (1991). *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Willis, D. (1990). *The lexical syllabus: A new approach to language learning*. London: Collins ELT.
- Willis, J. and Willis, D. (1989). *Collins COBUILD English course*. London: Collins COBUILD.
- Willis, D. and Willis, J. (2006). *Doing Task-based Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.